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La philosophie antique by Pierre Vesperini*

French philosophers such as Pierre Hadot, Michel Onfray, and Pierre Vesperini argue that modernity, influenced by ancient Christianity, has misinterpreted ancient Greek philosophy. This has cut us off from the ancients. The fresh and even provocative interpretations of ancient philosophy of these three thinkers depict it as a way of life and not simply as competing schools of thought. Vesperini leaves readers with the notion that not only Christianity but also later German thinkers radically altered what we today regard as the essence of ancient philosophy. Ancient Christianity's uncompromising declaration that faith, not philosophy, led to the only true philosophy ended the often playful convivium in which ancient Greek philosophers thrived. In order to convey to readers the extent of these changes, the author first provides ample and fascinating background to the varied and dynamic Greek philosophical mindset, starting from the pre-Socratics. Throughout *La philosophie antique*, Vesperini challenges modernity's deeply-rooted assumptions about the nature and practice of philosophy.

Like Hadot and Onfray, Vesperini succeeds at making the reader more aware and critical of our current interpretation of the ancients, which he blames in part on modern German thought. According to the

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* Pierre Vesperini, *La philosophie antique. Essai d'histoire* (Paris: Fayard, 2019), 493 pages. ISBN: 978-2-213-67850-4.

author, Hegel's view led one thinker to typically remark: "It is thanks to the Greek polis that 'rational thought' could be born."¹ Yet Vesperini asserts *contra* Hegel that the ancient world never split religion from philosophy. This notion of a split remains common. Vesperini likens the intellectual ferment in Germany between 1770 and 1830 to the Italian Renaissance in terms of its intellectual power. This period built the modern template for philosophy, including in its "idealization of Antiquity" and "the elevation of history to the status of a fundamental science of the spirit."² This perspective, particularly in its elevation of Greek over Roman thought, influenced subsequent teaching of philosophy.

Vesperini follows G. Colli in arguing that Greek thought did not slough off the "irrational," "mystique," or "mythique" over the centuries in favor of rationalism, but retained these elements throughout its pre-Christian history.³ But it is not so easy to challenge modern preconceptions. Vesperini endorses Foucault's observation, "Our entire epoch . . . tries to escape Hegel. But to really escape Hegel supposes that we understand exactly *what it costs to separate ourselves from him*."⁴ Such words speak of a certain humility: that scholars cannot simply turn their backs on a certain perspective, however troublesome that perspective may be, because it forms so many of our basic assumptions. Vesperini aims for a more authentic view of the ancient thinkers by attempting to differentiate between modern, that is German, views of the ancients, and what he sees as the real ancients.

One way he accomplishes this is by depicting the personalities of ancient Greek philosophy and their societies. Philosophers exuded religious power. Thales and Anaxagorus, for instance, "saw that which was

¹ Vesperini, *La philosophie antique*, 35.

² *Ibid.*, 32.

³ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

hidden.”⁵ The vision of the power behind the universe necessitated theological, not rational, discourse. *Sophia* therefore came from the gods, not from reason. Ancient Greek thought, steeped in religious assumptions, commonly cautioned that humans needed to stay humble and not venture outside of their limits.⁶ Ancient Greek philosophy mixed with the conviviality and social bonding of religious practice and beliefs. “All the secret cults offered authentic ‘parties for knowledge’” because this knowledge freed humans from the path toward death and led them toward becoming gods.⁷ The extremist Epicurus and his garden of delights, over which he made himself a god, exemplifies the playfulness that accompanied theological preoccupation. He dropped the prevalent notion from Plato and other thinkers that philosophy serves politics, instead regarding philosophy’s task as bringing happiness. Seeking virtue was vanity. In addition to permanent enthusiasm, pleasure—to live like the gods, wanting for nothing—was the goal: “We do not need to wait for death to achieve happiness.”⁸ Yet paradoxically these *bon vivants* did not encourage laxness. To bring about the harmony that Epicurus’ family of philosophers sought required “impeccable discipline.”⁹ Perhaps to soften any resulting puritanism, Epicurus the sage required a charismatic enthusiasm.

Vesperini shows that Greek philosophy did not develop in a linear fashion, away from religion and toward rationalism. Ancient Greek philosophy didn’t give up religious or initiatory practice. The gods remained inherent fixtures. The Enlightenment and its aftermath simply read a kind of church-state separation into these thinkers. Vesperini occasionally weaves modern views into his account of the ancients to

⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 184.

highlight discrepancies and to show certain modern perspectives according with his vision: “The Socrates of modern thinkers is double: He is the first philosopher of doubt, of critique, of dialectical discussion, and he is the first philosopher who invites the individual to reflect on himself, and to apprehend himself as a subject.”¹⁰ Vesperini’s view of Socrates parallels in some ways the common modern view: The enigma of Socrates is that “he is the most wise because he knows that he knows nothing,” but, believing that his mission comes from God, he remains a theological thinker. He aims to destroy human thought in order to show the greatness of God.¹¹ Vesperini’s Socrates, in other words, is more complex than modernity has assumed. The author likewise depicts Plato as rejecting the “*sophia* of the sages of the past” without rejecting the gods, who are the true sages. Even though philosophers were no longer sages, they were charged with a serious and high mission. The Academy served the polis by developing the idea of justice and of men who would lead the citizens out of their caves of delusion. Plato envisaged philosophy as “the research and acquisition of the truth,” which he pursued through the dialectic method.¹² Yet neither he nor anyone else could ever transmit the truth orally, as the truth came from within and was unspeakable.

In turning to philosophy in the ancient Egyptian city of Alexandria, Vesperini examines certain powerful shifts in ancient Greek thought. Alexandrine philosophy more closely resembled encyclopedic knowledge and learning than it had in the past, as exemplified in the city’s famous library. Vesperini cannot identify the cause of this revolution: “This sudden importance for the written word is inexplicable, as is also inexplicable the sudden interest of the Greeks for the knowledge

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹² *Ibid.*, 134.

and 'barbarian wisdom'."¹³ Greek thinkers suddenly opened up to Egyptian, Persian, and Babylonian traditions. Alexandria adopted a certain epistemology through its urge to classify the library's holdings. Along with its "polumathia," this organizing indicated the spirit of Aristotle.

Yet Vesperini argues that Alexandrine philosophy retained its religious nature alongside the embrace of non-Greek practices: "For the Greeks, Egyptian priests were the masters of *philosophia*," from whom one could receive an initiation. Knowledge at this point still stemmed from religious practice. Initiation meant that "a god *reveals* to a mortal the truth that is hidden from other people," an idea prevalent in the Mediterranean at the time.¹⁴ In other words, thinkers still saw the sage as a bridge to the divine and to divinity. Egyptian practices, particularly close to the divine, were romanticized. The Egyptian Hermes Trismegiste was the great visionary of knowledge. "'Hermetic' writings spoke the common language of the Greek philosophical schools."¹⁵ All in all, this was a continuation of the religious approach of pre-Alexandrine Greek philosophy.

Rome's reorientation of philosophy did not radically alter the basics of Greek philosophy as much as Christianity later did. Vesperini identifies three significant groupings of philosophy in Rome in the second century B.C.: encyclopedic, initiatic, and ethical. They were not exclusive. While the initiatic aspect was reserved for the powerful, the ethical was more widespread. More interestingly, philosophy in ancient Rome played an essential political role as the republic turned into the empire. Given the ancient Roman love of freedom, philosophers had to distinguish between a tyrant and the legitimacy of the emperor in order to fit the political revolution into previous moulds. They became public

¹³ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 212.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 219.

relations men in exploiting theology. The emperor was not a tyrant, but had the blessing of the gods. Philosophers extended this PR to the image of the emperor. He was the good shepherd: “He watches over his subjects just as God watches over the world.”¹⁶ He was a sage.

Despite his assertion that the German creative period between 1760 and 1830 recast ancient philosophy, Vesperini argues most forcefully that it is really Christianity that ended the banquet. For Vesperini, what has Christianity left us with in our post-modern era? The misleading belief that we need a dominant belief. We wrongfully assume that philosophy somehow transcends politics, but Vesperini argues convincingly that philosophy is more engaged politically than ever before, as in Marxism. Like Plato and many of the other ancient Greeks and Romans, we now once again apply philosophy to politics in the form of ideology. We have inherited from Christendom a joyless, unplayful philosophy—quite unlike the ancient Greeks’ convivium. The author turns to the famous British child psychoanalyst, Donald Winnicott, proclaiming with him that our only way out is play and, in Vesperini’s words, “the free elaboration of thoughts that come in the most diverse forms (philosophy, literature, art, religion, cinema, politics) but which are characterized by their total independence with regards to the practical necessities of social life.”¹⁷



¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 269.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 305.

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SUMMARY

This paper is a review of Pierre Vesperini's book: *La philosophie antique. Essai d'histoire* (Paris: Fayard, 2019). According to the author, Vesperini attempts to make the reader more aware and critical of our current interpretation of the ancients. He does it by showing that modernity, influenced by ancient Christianity, misinterpreted ancient philosophy, and that the latter did not slough off the "irrational," "mystique," or "mythique" over the centuries in favor of rationalism, but retained these elements throughout its pre-Christian history.

KEYWORDS

Pierre Vesperini, ancient philosophy, religion, rationalism, modernity, Christianity.

REFERENCES

Vesperini, Pierre. *La philosophie antique. Essai d'histoire*. Paris: Fayard, 2019.